

Eliot Higgins

Eliot Ward Higgins (born January 1979), who previously used the pseudonym **Brown Moses**, is a British citizen journalist and blogger, known for using open sources and social media to investigate the Syrian Civil War, 2014–15 Russian military intervention in Ukraine and the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17. He first gained mainstream media attention by identifying weapons in uploaded videos from the Syrian conflict.^{[1][2]} He is the founder of Bellingcat, a website for citizen journalists to investigate current events using open-source information such as videos, maps and pictures.

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Life and work

Higgins was born in Shrewsbury in January 1979.^{[1][3][4]} His previous work history includes work in finance and admin.^[5] In 2012, when Higgins began blogging the Syrian civil war, he was unemployed and spent his days taking care of his child at home;^[1] he is married to a Turkish woman.^{[6][7]} Higgins took the pseudonym Brown Moses from the Frank Zappa song "Brown Moses" on the album *Thing-Fish*.^[1]

Higgins' analyses of Syrian weapons, which began as a hobby out of his home in his spare time, are frequently cited by the press and human rights groups and have led to parliamentary discussion.^[1] His Brown Moses Blog began in March 2012 by covering the Syrian conflict. Higgins operates by monitoring over 450 YouTube channels daily looking for images of weapons and tracking when new types appear in the war, where, and with whom.^[1] According to *Guardian* reporter Matthew Weaver, Higgins has been "hailed as something of a pioneer" for his work. Higgins has no background

Eliot Higgins



Eliot Higgins in 2015

Born	Eliot Ward Higgins January 1979 (age 39) Shrewsbury, Shropshire, England
Nationality	British
Occupation	Blogger, weapons analyst, citizen journalist
Known for	Analysis on the Syrian Civil War and the

or training in weapons and is entirely self-taught, saying that "Before the Arab spring I knew no more about weapons than the average Xbox owner. I had no knowledge beyond what I'd learned from Arnold Schwarzenegger and Rambo."^[1] Higgins does not speak or read Arabic.^[7]

downing of MH17

Higgins is credited with being among the first to report on the widespread use of improvised barrel bombs by the Syrian government, a phenomenon which has spread to other troubled nations such as Iraq to combat insurgencies and opposition forces.^{[8][9]}

Other aspects of the Syrian conflict uncovered and documented by Higgins include the use of cluster bombs in 2012, which the Syrian government previously denied using; the proliferation of shoulder-launched heat-seeking missiles known as MANPADS; and the proliferation of Croatian-made weapons which was reportedly connected to the United States, a story later picked up by *The New York Times*.^[1] He has also investigated the Syrian regime's alleged use of chemical weapons, including the Ghouta chemical attack in detail.^{[10][11]} Higgins has also performed consulting work for groups such as Human Rights Watch.^[12]

Higgins used geolocation to publish an estimate of where the James Foley execution video was made outside Raqqa, an Islamic State stronghold in north-central Syria. Higgins used visual markers in stills from the video and his interpretation of satellite images of the terrain around Raqqa.^[13]

In 2015, Higgins partnered with the Atlantic Council to co-author the report Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin's War in Ukraine (<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/hiding-in-plain-sight-putin-s-war-in-ukraine-and-boris-nemtsov-s-putin-war>) which examined direct Russian military involvement in Ukraine. The report was the inspiration for the documentary Selfie Soldiers (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zssIFN2mso>) in which Vice News correspondent Simon Ostrovsky followed digital traces left by a Russian soldier named Bato Dambaev who was sent to fight in Eastern Ukraine. In June 2015 on the invitation of former Belgium Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, Higgins together with his report co-author Atlantic Council's Maks Czuperski presented Hiding in Plain Sight at the European Parliament alongside Russian opposition figure Ilya Yashin and former Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov.^[14] Higgins joined the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab as Senior Non-Resident Fellow in 2016.^[15]

Reception

Higgins has received significant praise and support from human rights groups, journalists, and non-profit organisations. "Brown Moses is among the best out there when it comes to weapons monitoring in Syria," said Peter Bouckaert, emergencies director at Human Rights Watch.^[1] *The New York Times* war reporter C.J. Chivers said that fellow journalists owe a debt to Higgins' investigative reporting in Syria. "Many people, whether they admit or not, have been relying on that blog's daily labour to cull the uncountable videos that circulate from the conflict," he said.^[1] Amnesty International said that the Brown Moses Blog was vital in proving the Syrian government was using ballistic missiles, information then used to send a research mission to Syria.^[16]

Eliot Higgins has been a subject of interest for the British and U.S. media and is described as "one of the world's foremost citizen journalists" by News Limited reporter Victoria Crow.^[17] He has been profiled in print by *The Guardian*,^[1] *The Independent*,^[10] *The Huffington Post*,^[6] and *The New Yorker*.^[2] Television features have been run by Channel 4 News^[16] and CNN International.^[7] He has also been covered by non-English sources.^[18]

Bellingcat

On 15 July 2014, Higgins began a new website called Bellingcat for citizen journalists to investigate current events using open-source information such as videos, maps and pictures. Its launch was funded by a Kickstarter campaign.^[19] Bellingcat's self-taught open-source analysts include Higgins and eight volunteers.^[20]

Among its major projects, Bellingcat has investigated the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in Ukraine. Its work is being considered by the Dutch police investigating the crash,^[10] and Higgins has been interviewed twice by the investigators.^[21] Bellingcat has suggested that the anti-aircraft missile that hit the plane was fired by a Russian unit, the 53rd Buk brigade, based in the city of Kursk.^[22] On 31 May 2015, Bellingcat released a report alleging among other things photo manipulation of satellite images released by the Russian Ministry of Defense.^[23] The photos concerned the location of Ukrainian Buk missile launchers around the time MH17 was shot down.^[24] Bellingcat's use of error level analysis in its report was criticized by Jens Kriese, a professional image analyst.^[25] Nevertheless, Bellingcat's findings about which field the missile was fired from were vindicated in September 2016 by the Dutch-led MH17 Joint Investigation Team.^[26]

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External links

- [Bellingcat](https://bellingcat.com/) (<https://bellingcat.com/>), a website for citizen investigative journalists founded by Higgins. Posts tagged [MH17](https://www.bellingcat.com/tag/mh17/) (<https://www.bellingcat.com/tag/mh17/>) and [August 21st](https://www.bellingcat.com/tag/august-21st/) (<https://www.bellingcat.com/tag/august-21st/>) (Ghouta chemical attack)
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